

“The God of All Grace”
Genesis 17:1-27
July 31st, 2016

It's possible that most of us here this morning realize there is something special about this book (the Bible). Now, I'm not referring to this specific copy in my hand; it's no different than the one you have, really.

I refer to what this book is, and what it teaches. God has given us this collection of 66 books which we call the Holy Bible “to be the rule of faith and life.” (*WCF*, Chap 1, para 2) The Bible is God's Word to us, and, as we recited earlier in this service, it principally teaches “what (we are) to believe concerning God, and what duty God requires of (us).” (*WSC* Q. 3)

Yet, this book is like other books, in that we are to read it just like we read other books, meaning, we read it (them) from beginning to end, left to right. We cannot fully understand the end of any book without also reading that which comes before it. So, it is with the Bible. To understand the last portion of the Bible properly (the New Testament), we must also have a good understanding of the beginning portions of the Bible (the Old Testament).

This reminder is helpful as we come to the text before us today, **Genesis 17:1-27**. What God promised to Abram in Genesis 12, and augmented in Genesis 15, He ratifies with a ceremony and sign in today's text. We must think back to those preceding chapters (which we've covered in recent weeks) to properly understand what is taking place in today's text. And, when we come to the New Testament, to understand and live it properly, we must remember what has taken place beforehand to get us to that point.

Genesis 17:1-27:

“When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the LORD appeared to Abram and said to him, ‘I *am* Almighty God; walk before Me and be blameless. ² And I will make My **covenant** between Me and you, and will multiply you exceedingly.’ ³ Then Abram fell on his face, and God talked with him, saying: ⁴ “As for Me, behold, My **covenant** is with you, and you shall be a father of many nations. ⁵ No longer shall your name be called Abram, but your name shall be Abraham; for I have made you a father of many nations. ⁶ I will make you exceedingly fruitful; and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come from you. ⁷ And I will establish My **covenant** between Me and you and your descendants after you in their generations, for an everlasting **covenant**, to be God to you and your descendants after you. ⁸ Also I give to you and your descendants after you the land in which you are a stranger, all the land of Canaan, as an everlasting possession; and I will be their God.”

⁹ And God said to Abraham: “As for you, you shall keep My **covenant**, you and your descendants after you throughout their generations. ¹⁰ This *is* My **covenant** which you shall keep, between Me and you and your descendants after you: Every male child among you shall be circumcised; ¹¹ and you shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the **covenant** between Me and you. ¹² He who is eight days old among you shall be circumcised, every male child in your generations, he who is born in your house or bought with money from any foreigner who is not your descendant. ¹³ He who is born in your house and he who is bought with your money must be circumcised, and My **covenant** shall be in your flesh for an everlasting **covenant**. ¹⁴ And the uncircumcised male child, who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin, that person shall be cut off from his people; he has broken My **covenant**.”

¹⁵ Then God said to Abraham, “As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her name Sarai, but Sarah *shall be* her name. ¹⁶ And I will bless her and also give you a son by her; then I will bless her, and she shall be *a mother of nations*; kings of peoples shall be from her.”

¹⁷ Then Abraham fell on his face and laughed, and said in his heart, “Shall *a child* be born to a man who is one hundred years old? And shall Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear *a child*?” ¹⁸ And Abraham said to God, “Oh, that Ishmael might live before You!”

¹⁹ Then God said: “No, Sarah your wife shall bear you a son, and you shall call his name Isaac; I will establish My **covenant** with him for an everlasting **covenant**, *and* with his descendants after him. ²⁰ And as for Ishmael, I have heard you. Behold, I have blessed him, and will make him fruitful, and will multiply him exceedingly. He shall beget twelve princes, and I will make him a great nation. ²¹ But My **covenant** I will establish with Isaac, whom Sarah shall bear to you at this set time next year.” ²² Then He finished talking with him, and God went up from Abraham.

²³ So Abraham took Ishmael his son, all who were born in his house and all who were bought with his money, every male among the men of Abraham’s house, and circumcised the flesh of their foreskins that very same day, as God had said to him. ²⁴ Abraham *was* ninety-nine years old when he was circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin. ²⁵ And Ishmael his son *was* thirteen years old when he was circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin. ²⁶ That very same day Abraham was circumcised, and his son Ishmael; ²⁷ and all the men of his house, born in the house or bought with money from a foreigner, were circumcised with him.”

‘Covenant’ is clearly the focus in this chapter; the word occurs no less than 13 times. You’ll recall that this covenant was ‘cut’ (inaugurated) in chapter 15, and it is now confirmed and set in order here in chapter 17. The chapter can be divided into the parties of the covenant as follows:

MP 1 – God’s Place in the Covenant

MP 2 – Abram’s Place in the Covenant

MP 3 – Our Place in the Covenant

God’s place in the covenant is easily identified because of the words “I will.” We find them used 12 times here in Genesis 17: verse 2 (twice), 6 (twice), 7, 8, 16 (twice), 19, 20, and 21.

Just what does this concept “covenant” mean? As I’ve asked the kids each of the last couple children’s sermons, a covenant is “a relationship that God establishes with us and guarantees by his word.” (*First Catechism*, Q. 22). God initiates the covenant. Anytime He does anything for, or toward sinful humanity, He demonstrates Himself to be the God of All Grace. In stooping to covenant with us, God puts Himself, His name, and His honor at stake. He has promises He must fulfill.

In **Genesis 12:1-3**, God promised a land to Abram. He promised to make Abram into a great nation, and God promised Abram and his offspring would be a blessing. In **Genesis 15:17**, God (in the form of a smoking oven and a burning torch) passed through pieces of animals that had been cut in two, thereby obligating Himself to fulfill the promises He made to Abram and his posterity.

With today’s passage, specifically, verse 7, we see God revealing the foundation of His covenant with Abram and his seed – the major promise at the heart of the covenant. “And I will establish My **covenant** between Me and you and your descendants after you in their generations, for an everlasting **covenant**, to be God to you and your descendants after you.”

For years, Abram and his wife Sarai waited upon God, wondering if He would come through on His promise of an heir. With Genesis chapter 16, we learned last week Abram and Sarai tired of waiting on God, deciding instead to take things into their own hands. So, Abram and Sarai's handmaiden Hagar came together to give birth to Abram's first born, Ishmael. At this point in time (Genesis 17), Abram had a 13-year old son. A full 13 years have passed from verse 16 of Chapter 16 to the beginning of today's passage!

Do you remember 13 years ago? The year was 2003. Three years after the Y2K scare; Saddam Hussein was captured in Tikrit, Iraq by US Army personnel. It was the spring and early summer of 2003 when just about every house in Aledo got a new roof due to a hail storm that damaged property. Abram and Sarai hadn't heard a word from God for 13 years; perhaps they were concluding that Ishmael was the heir God had promised them.

One child. That's all Abram had. "The father of nations" was in all actuality "the father of one." He was 99 years old, far beyond the time of procreation (humanly speaking). Yet, as we have seen, God continues to emphasize that Abram will be a man of *many* descendants. He does so because He is the God of All Grace!

Take note that God even gives a name to His child of promise (verse 19) – Isaac. The heir of Abram would come through his barren wife, Sarai! (How like God to do the impossible!)

As verse 5 tells us, God changed Abram's name to Abraham, which means "father of a multitude." And, according to verse 15, God changed Sarai's name to "Sarah," which means "princess." In this season of political conventions and elections, we learn that God is the One Who is the true "Change Maker" (and not any candidate for public office in these United States)!

Having looked at **God's place in the covenant**, we now look at **Abram's place in the covenant**. His place is identified by the words "as for you" and "you shall." We find them used 7 times throughout these verses: verse 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 15, and 19.

As with God, Abram, too, had conditions to fulfill in this covenant. In verses 10-13, we learn that all male children among Abram's clan are to receive circumcision; this included Abram himself, and all males, those born into his family, and those otherwise brought into the family.

Circumcision was the cutting away of the foreskin on the male sexual organ. The normal candidate was newly born male babies – they were to be circumcised on the 8th day after birth. We should note that females were not excluded from the covenant, but it seems they were "covered" under the sign carried out on males. This circumcision would serve as a 'sign of the covenant' between God and Abraham's people. They were marked out for Him; set aside as God's own special people.

Commentator John Currid's words are helpful here, "One cannot be part of the covenant and not carry the seal or sign of the covenant; they are inextricably bound. Circumcision is a sign of a physical witness to a spiritual reality. It symbolizes the family nature of the covenant itself. (Currid, 314)

Abram, and all coming after him, were compelled to carry the sign of the covenant God made with him. Yet, as verse 14 points out, circumcision was a two-edged sword; it either cuts one *into* the covenant, or cuts one *out of* the covenant. “And the uncircumcised male child, who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin, that person shall be cut off from his people; he has broken My **covenant.**”

So, Abram’s place in God’s covenant was to ensure his people were marked out unto God, Who had entered into covenant with him... and them.

We’ve seen both **God’s place** and **Abram’s place in the covenant**; *but what about us? Do we have a place in this covenant?* Yes, we do. If you are a believer in Christ, you have been joined to Christ and you have taken on a new name - His name. That name is “Christian.” It means “Christ one” or “Christ follower.”

Further, if you are a believer in Jesus Christ, you are also a child of Abraham. **Galatians 3:29** teaches, “And if you *are* Christ’s, then you are Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise.”

So, Abram – and all Israelite males – were to have on their body the mark of belonging to God. *Does this practice of receiving the mark of God’s people carry over into the New Testament?* Yes, it does. As does everything else that God hasn’t told us to stop doing that was started in the Old Testament. Though with the advent of the New Covenant, females are now also included in receiving the mark.

Throughout Old Testament times, God’s people were to refrain from eating certain animals (camels, rabbits, & pigs among others) because God forbid His people from eating them. The same held true through the time the Gospel accounts were written. It wasn’t until Acts 10, when God gave a vision to Peter that His people were now allowed to eat all things- they were now considered clean and edible for God’s people. He is the God of All Grace!

In like manner, after Jesus Christ rose from the dead, the first day of the week, Sunday, became the Christian Sabbath, God’s people had kept Saturday as the Sabbath up to that time. It changed because in the New Testament, God had declared the first day of the week to be the Lord’s Day. (**Revelation 1:10**)

And, with the death of Jesus on the cross at Calvary, we no longer sacrifice bulls, goats, lambs, pigeons or turtle doves on an altar to appease God as the Old Testament saints did. The New Testament teaches Jesus offered Himself once to bear the sins of many, because it is not possible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins. (Hebrews 9:28; 10:4)

Because Jesus shed His blood at Calvary, His people no longer need to provide bloody sacrifices, nor bear a mark on their bodies that results in the shedding of their own blood (circumcision). Now, the mark of God’s covenant is baptism. This congregation, as well as so many others hold that, though the covenant sign has changed in the New Testament era, the covenant pattern has not and therefore children of covenant believers are to receive the sign of the covenant.

For sure, if Christian parents were to no longer have the sign of God's covenant placed on their children, we should expect to see a clear word rescinding such a practice in the New Testament. But, we do not have such a rescinding. What was begun in the Old Testament continues in the New Testament and beyond unless God says otherwise.

Have you received baptism? Baptism for the Christian indicates that one belongs to the people of God. It is true that the act of being baptized doesn't save you from hell, nor did receiving circumcision. Yet, both of these physical acts carry with them a spiritual reality. To be saved to God, you must have a circumcised heart; one that is no longer in captivity to sin. To be saved to God, you must have your sin cleansed away; so you are no longer cold and hardened to the things of God.

Are you a baptized member of Christ's Church? If so, continue to live for Him by serving others. Never forget the great cost of your redemption from sin.

Not a baptized member of Christ's Church? Consider your standing with the Holy God Who created you to glorify Him. Turn from your sin to faith in Jesus Christ. Come to Jesus, the God of All Grace!